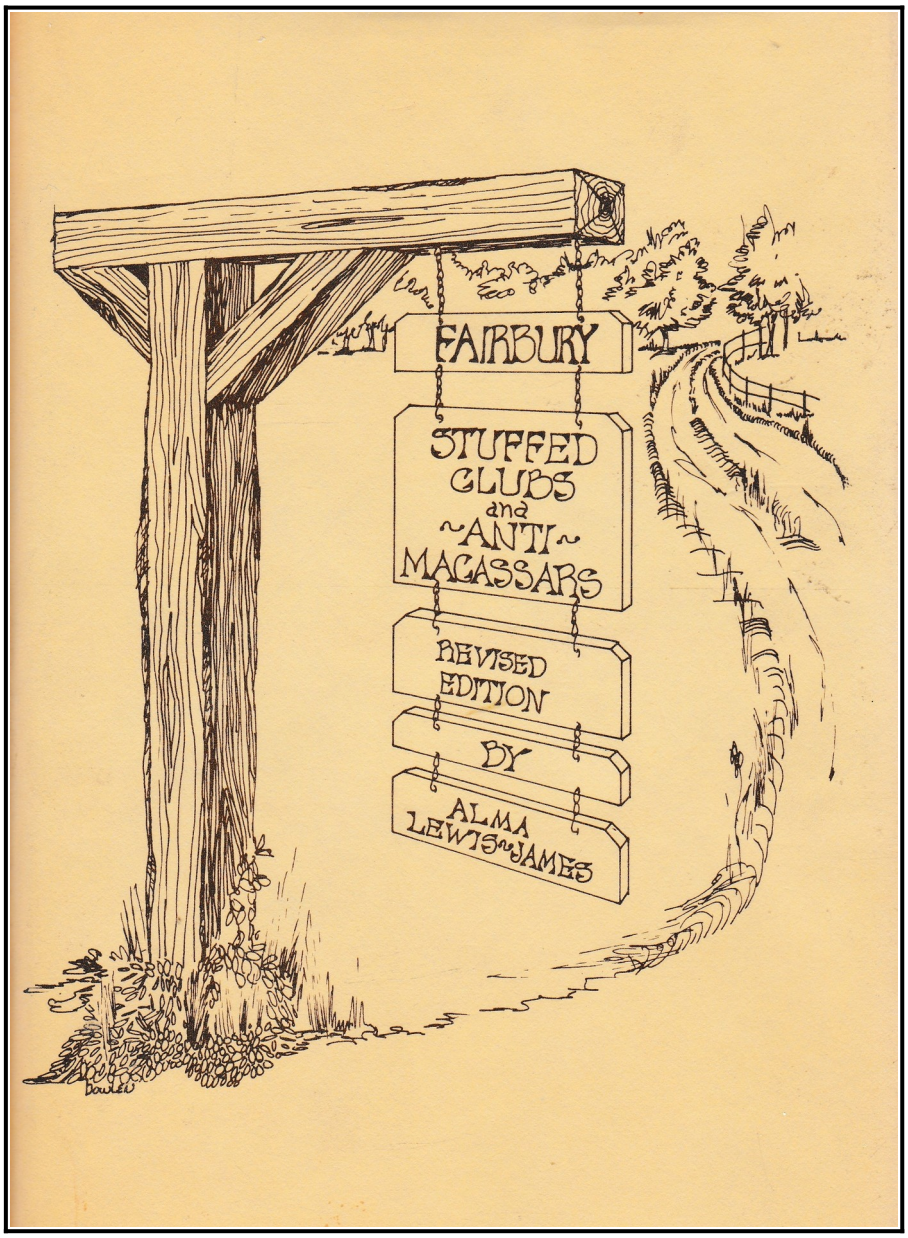
Excerpt from 2nd Edition of Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars book about Fairbury, Illinois Railroad History

Fairbury Historian, Alma Lewis James, wrote her 1st edition of this book in 1967. Ten years later, she issued a 2nd edition of the same book.

I took an excerpt from her 1977 Second Edition about the history of the two railroads that were in Fairbury in the early years.



CHAPTER I

Fire and Feud

In the period immediately following the Civil War, the village of Fairbury, Illinois, held the distinction of being one place where no company would insure any property.

The town was riddled by factions. The citizenry enthusiastically took sides on every conceivable subject. Not only did the partisanships of the war still flame, but the saloon crowd was against the "drys"; the townspeople against the farmers and the railroad men; the Republicans against the Democrats; Catholics against Protestants. The latter themselves were divided into Methodists, Presbyterians and "Hardshell Baptists", and each of these was prepared to defend instantly its differences of creed among themselves, as well as against all outsiders; but the feud that completely split the town, regardless of sex, age, religion or political belief, stemmed from a private quarrel between two business men and progressed to the point where the whole of Fairbury was involved, and each faction earnestly tried to burn down the town.

In sober fact, Fairbury, almost from its inception, was founded in feud.

Caleb Patton owned a farm where the east part of Fairbury now stands. It was out in the middle of nowhere in the swamps of the prairie. The grass grew taller than a horse's back, and the mud was thick and deep. Wheat for the scanty sprinkling of settlers was ground into flour at Ottawa; their grain had to be hauled to Chicago to be sold; and for some time, their mail, if any, could be called for at Bloomington. Anything resembling a settlement was at Avoca, on the banks of the Vermillion River, five miles north.

When Patton heard that the builders of the new Peoria and Oquawka Railroad (later to become the Toledo, Peoria and Warsaw) were headed in his direction, he hunted up the Chief Construction Engineer, Octave Chanute, and made him a little dicker: If Chanute would influence the stockholders in his railroad to run the line through Patton's farm, he would give him half of the town site. Chanute agreed, and swung his end of the deal. Patton happily laid his farm out into lots, presenting four to his Baptist church, and another suitable space to the railroad for a depot; and then for some

obscure but hopeful reason, that chunk of lonesomeness was named "Fairbury".

The response to his invitation to buy lots was immediate. Some of the inhabitants of Avoca foresaw their death sentence in having been by-passed, and began hauling away their houses on wagons to the new location before the tracks reached there.

The Abel Filley residence, one of the oldest houses in Fairbury, still stands at 110 West Maple street. The rear portion of the building was one of the houses hauled down from Avoca, and the front part was added in 1869.

They made a very small cluster of houses, but it was a cluster, just the same, what with new ones a-building, and there was a city limits to the place. In a short time when Chanute's construction gang reached there, he was met by a delegation of founding fathers, who informed him they had passed an ordinance whereby no railroad tracks were to go through the town. Instead, it would be nice if they went around.

Work on the railroad was slow, being done by gangs of labourers grading with teams of oxen. Chanute was operating on a shoestring, for it was not until railroads had pushed farther west and proved their worth, that the capitalists became more generous with their money. He had economized on every inch of track, and a couple of unexpected miles more of it, together with a new right-of-way to be

bought, would amount to calamity.

He also was accountable to his stockholders. They had permitted him to enter into this agreement, and Patton had shown good-will by his donation of the depot site, and now the inhabitants of this minuscule hamlet, of which he owned one-half, were bent on making a monkey out of him.

One of the first laws passed by the new Illinois legislature had provided that if a railroad got its rails down without opposition, the rails stayed down. Of course it was sometimes necessary to convince the other fellows with clubs, but those early railroads were not built by weaklings. Octave Chanute tried to enforce his agreement with Patton, but every time he stuck a rail across the town line, he encountered a delegation of armed guards. They stayed right there, too, with their shotguns handy, while one of their citizens jumped on his horse and rode hell-for-leather to Pontiac, which had recently graduated from a sawmill to the county seat, to get an injunction.

Chanute's rage at the situation is completely understandable, but the reasoning of the townspeople is considerably less clear. Foremost in their minds, of course, was the fact that the lunatic appropriations of the first Illinois legislature in behalf of the railroads, had beggared the state and its settlers for twenty long years, and the money, squandered, had come to very little.

Furthermore, a number of the citizens were Easterners, and they had brought with them the ideas popular at the time, which were much encouraged by the stage and canal barge lines, that the reckless speed of those infernal machines, which even reached as high as thirty miles an hour, not only would menace the life and limb of a passenger, but also the view of trees and houses flashing past was certain to damage his eyes and produce insanity. Besides that, they reasoned, what would keep the engines from leaping the tracks and running wild among innocent children and livestock?

Of course, somebody in Fairbury may have sensed an opportunity to make a handsome profit by the proposed change of route, but, naturally, this was not mentioned, at least publicly.

At that time, money was extremely scarce in Illinois, and not one share of Peoria and Oquawka Railroad stock was ever sold in Fairbury, although the town did scrape up enough funds, finally, to

build a depot. They had to put the thing on stilts to get it out of the mud.

In the face of this sort of public opinion, Chanute was clever. He did not use force, but quietly laid his rails to the eastern edge of the town, skipped Fairbury, began again at the western edge, and worked straight on until Saturday night. In the darkness and secretly, he moved his crews back; and then the next morning, at first dawn, and reinforced by armed guards of his own, he was ready for business. To the consternation of the dumbfounded and helpless villagers, he rushed the track straight through the town and ran a locomotive over it to make it legal. It was Sunday and the courthouse was closed. By Monday morning, he was well on his way.

Chanute finished his railroad that year, and lived to enjoy years of wealth. Later he further proved his prophetic wisdom in new-fangled ideas by becoming one of the backers of the Wright Brothers. Chanute Air Force Base at Rantoul, Illinois, was named for him.

Thus it was, that progress gave the dwellers of Fairbury a boost in spite of themselves, and under that impetus, during the first winter, they built themselves a grain elevator and a general store. When spring came, a dry goods store started competition. A small hotel followed, then two boarding houses, grocery store, drug store, wagon making and repair shop, tavern, lumber yard and Methodist church.

It was the next year, 1859, when John Marsh bought eighty acres of land adjoining Patton's on the west, and had it surveyed for an addition to the town. He then caused much excitement by going against mining tradition to bore for coal in the open prairie, but he did discover a substantial vein of good quality. Bat Masterson worked for Marsh in this mine for several years before he went on to Dodge City and became a famous United States Marshal. He was remembered because, unlike the other miners, he was always well dressed and quiet mannered.

The mines brought real prosperity, for it gave the settlers a cheap fuel and supplied the railroad as well. Heretofore, their engines had burned wood cut from the forests, but the supply was fast vanishing.

Because of the mines, other railroad business came to Fairbury,

and the merchants were glad to get it, until they discovered that it was hard to collect payment. After pressing matters legally, they attached everything belonging to the poverty-ridden railroad, even going so far as to garnishee freight bills before they were collected, and finally forced it into bankruptcy.

The railroad men cherished their grievances, got drunk and did everything possible to annoy the people, who considered it simple justice when they retaliated. For ten years both factions pestered the other in every way imaginable, until that freight train went through town.

For this occasion the engineer had it fired up heavily before before reaching the settlement, and it whizzed through, belching enormous black clouds of smoke and live cinders. It had been a hot, dry fall, and the wind was blowing, and the sparks that fell on the East End elevator burst into ready flames.

When the engineer reached Forrest, his next stop six miles away, he looked back at the pall of smoke over Fairbury, and remarked with satisfaction that he had "set the whole damn town on fire".

As a matter of fact, he very nearly had. The business section of East Fairbury was wiped out, and a number of the homes went with it.

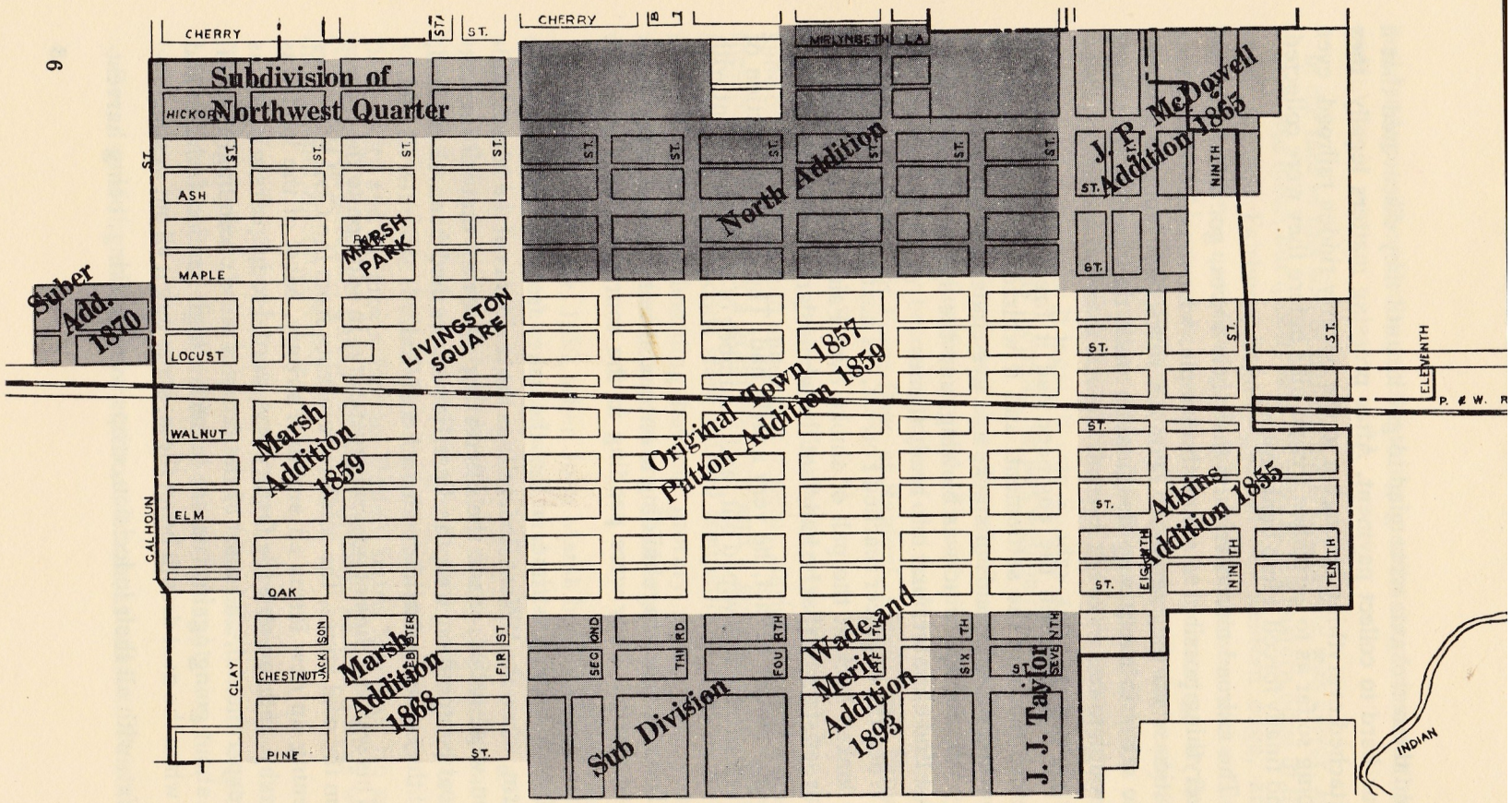
The stores began rebuilding at once, and suits against the railroad were started. They were pending in the courts for six years, but never settled.

It took much less time, in fact the ashes from the fire were still warm, when the "West Enders", as the residents of the Marsh addition were called, made the interesting discovery that all the cut-throat competition with the East End stores had been eliminated, and they piously considered it an Act of God.

This was at a time of general prosperity. In addition to the income from the coal mines, the soldiers returning from the Civil War were opening up new farms all around Fairbury. Most of the land was marshy, and so a new tile factory was started to help drain it. It was all experimental, and most of the farmers were exceedingly skeptical about going against nature in such a high-handed fashion, and so, when the next drouth beset them, some dug it all out again.

Yet, with all their indecision, crops were growing, being harvest-

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENTS TO 1900



The original town site with additions, 1857-1870.

MAP OF ADDITION

ed, and hauled into town to sell, and Marsh set about to capture the business in a big way. He bought three-hundred acres adjoining his original tract and began work to make everybody else look like pikers.

His part of town he located around two squares. One was donated to the city for recreation purposes, and it was to be called Marsh Park. He considered the lots around this to be choicer, and they were correspondingly higher priced, in spite of the fact that the park was under water every time it sprinkled. (The Catholic Church located not far north of this.)

The other park he named Livingston Square, and it was to be the market place. The water tower stands there now. On the south side of this he built his Arcade Block, a series of one story red brick buildings, simple and beautiful in design, with fan lights above the doors, and large show windows. These buildings housed two saddle and harness shops, a gun and sporting goods store, a poultry house, a drug store, and the Fairbury Marble Works which made monuments for the local cemetery. Later on they had a bedspring factory there.

With enticements like this, he persuaded the McDowells to build on the north side of Livingston Square. The McDowell Block housed their dry goods and hardware stores, and bank. The second story, which formed one large room, they named McDowell Hall, and declared it available for recreation purposes.

Furthermore, Marsh captured the post office for his town. That was on the east side of Livingston Square in the back of Ramsey's drug store. A restaurant opened next door to it, on the Main Street corner, with Walton's grist mill across the street.

Finally, in 1866, Marsh crowned the whole of his achievements by building the Livingston Hotel. It was a large, two-story frame building in "Central Park", and a part of the lower floor was used as a depot and waiting room for travelers. It cost $17,000, and was known far and wide as the only hotel in Central Illinois which had running water.

All this construction work made the modest rebuilding over in the East End seem very insignificant. Patton had sold out his real estate holdings, and now it was Wallace Amsbary who was one of the leading citizens of the East End. He owned a part interest in a grocery

store there.

Whatever started that famous feud is now forever lost. It must have been a trivial matter, or it surely would have been remembered, but under Amsbary's driving ambition, the East Enders went to work to match John Marsh, item for item. Marsh had a grist mill, and so they had one; ditto the dry goods, drug and grocery stores, and the grain elevators. They even decided to have a coal mine, too. Amsbary had to solicit Eastern capital for this, and import a group of Scotch miners who did the boreing.

These miners are well remembered for their all-night Bobby Burns celebrations, but they gave an unexpected twist to the life of the community. They were well educated, but they scandalized the rest of the town because they were "Infidels", or "Free Thinkers". They were headed by Amsbary himself, and were a potent force. Their hall, when they took up a subscription to match the McDowell Hall, was dedicated to "Free Thought". The center of the arch over the stage carried the date of 94 instead of 1871 A.D., reasoning that it was 94 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The address of dedication was given by Robert Ingersoll, the well-known Peoria lawyer and agnostic. The society had no chairs for their audience, but the people ranged themselves on planks placed upon nail kegs. The place was jammed to the doors, and another crowd stood outside.

Ingersoll spoke there several other times, and then he was challenged to a debate on religion by Reverend Underwood, the president of Eureka College. Fairbury was chosen as their meeting place, and the townspeople put a big tabernacle, on the East Side, of course, as there was no building in town big enough to hold the crowd. Hundreds of people came to hear them, and both men out-did themselves in oratory. Both of them claimed the decision.

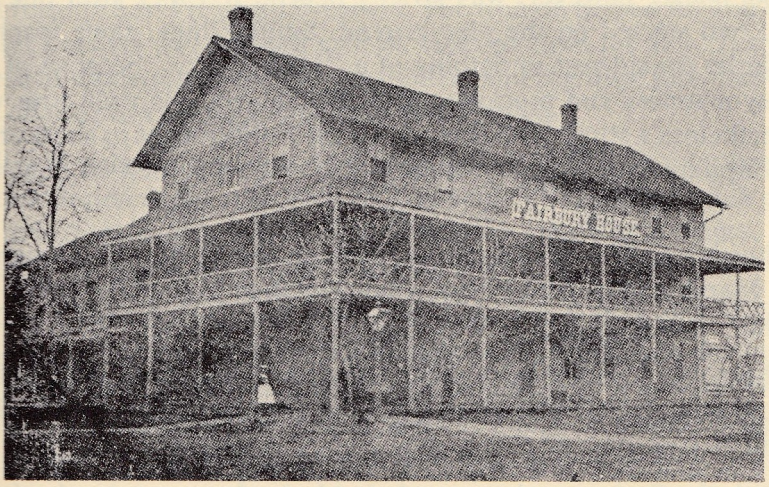
Now the East Enders may have been rubbing their hands with satisfaction over the building boom which had drawn them even with the West Siders, but their pleasure suddenly ceased with the arrival of a new railroad, the Chicago and Paducah, at the western boundary of the town.

However badly the Peoria and Oquawka had been treated, there was no doubt at all now about the people wanting the Chicago and Paducah road. It was to run from Strawn to Streator, and promised

to open up an entirely new territory. To the stupefaction of the Amsbary adherents, they discovered that Marsh had secretly used his influence to such effect that the new line was to come just within the city limits on his side of town, and then turn straight south toward Strawn. It was to bypass East Fairbury completely.

The construction gang reached the boundary on Saturday night. The president of the road was on hand, and Marsh and all his friends went up to McDowell Hall, where they had quite a party. The hangovers must have been terrific, because early next morning Amsbary and his friends slipped across into enemy territory and, aided by armed guards, laid the rails straight across town, where they were willing that it should then make the turn toward Strawn. They were not able to get hold of a locomotive to run over them until next day, but the rails stayed down, anyway.

To celebrate his victory, Amsbary build the "Fairbury House"; and, mindful of the lush advertising of the elegant Livingston Hotel, with tongue in cheek, he called his the "Poorest Hotel In Illinois". Nearly a hundred years later, this was to earn it a place in Ripley's "Believe It or Not".



The Fairbury House, 1879, had forty-five well kept rooms. It was later known as the Thomas House, and stood on the S.W. corner of Fourth and Walnut (Paducah Avenue).

Like its rival, the Fairbury House used its ground floor for a ticket office and waiting room, bringing the number of depots in the hamlet to the magnificent number of three.

Any improvement, East or West, and of any sort whatever, was accompanied by bitter arguments, followed by fights. The town had already earned the "worst name" of any in this section of the country. One main reason was that there were then so many rough miners, the three mines having become the big industry. Because of them, all the stores and shops stayed open until ten o'clock at night, and the saloons stayed open, too.

Every night there were at least three or four rip-roaring, bloody fights in which the battlers did their best to knock each other to bits. Men seized on every possible pretext for arguments, and every fight piled fresh fuel on the hatred between the two sections of the town. Not one person was untouched. Even the little boys went to war. Their dividing line was Second Street, and heaven help the adventurous gamin who dared step over it without plenty of friends, and ammunition by way of clods and stones, to back him up.

The little West Enders finally conquered the territory over to Seventh Street, which crowded the other fellows considerably. The school house, however, was strictly neutral territory after one big fight had started on the play-ground. Smith Olney, their teacher, might be considered something of a "Miss Nancy" because of his prissy manners and precious pronunciation, but his right arm was nevertheless a sturdy one. He settled their differences in short order by whipping every last one of the boys, and, from then on, that was that.

Thus it was, the deadly rivalry between the partisans of Amsbary and Marsh was running high when the fires started to break out again.

There had already been three extremely disastrous fires only a few months apart, and all three had been proven to be of incendiary origin.

With the first one, alone, a whole block of ten wooden business buildings and their contents burned to the ground; seven more with the next; and the third fire took four of the new brick buildings that they had erected after the Peoria and Oquawka locomotive blaze, together with the Amsbary and Jones grain elevator.